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ABSTRACT

This report summarizes results of a survey of 104 institutions belonging to the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges (NASULGC) in June 1996 concerning the institutions' admissions policies for first-year students. The report also includes data from a national survey of first-time, full-time freshmen enrolling in the fall of 1995. The two surveys looked at: admissions policies and recruitment strategies; application processes; enrollment caps and numbers of out-of-state students; and the characteristics of and competition for 1995 freshmen. The report concludes that, although public universities will continue to attract qualified students, fiscal restraints will restrain undergraduate enrollment during the next 10 years. The report also expects that competition among public universities will intensify across state borders. Also included are three summary charts showing: the geographic range of NASULGC institutions for the recruitment of first-year students (1990 and 1995); relative importance of various factors in the admissions process for first-year students in 1995; and percentage of NASULGC institutions reporting increased competition with different types of institutions during 1990-1995. An appendix which provides supplemental data from the NASULGC survey concerning admissions standards, number of applications per accepted student and yield rates, comparison of the 1995 first-year class with that of 1990, and competition with various types of institutions. (CH)

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Who's Coming To Campus?
Admissions Policies For Entering Freshmen at Public Universities

Campus administrators have had to contend with demographic and economic forces that have created new challenges to the recruitment process for first-year students. For example, the number of recent high school graduates dropped from 3.0 million in 1980 to 2.5 million by 1995[1]. At the same time, annual student charges increased at colleges and universities.

In addition to these external forces, internal institutional policy decisions also have exerted pressure on campus officials. Admissions officers and student personnel staff have been challenged to maintain or increase the academic qualifications of entering freshmen, to broaden the diversity of students on campus, and to provide adequate support services to enable undergraduates to successfully meet their educational goals.

How have public universities met these challenges during these difficult years? Have admissions officers been able to continue to attract and enroll qualified students? What currently are the most important criteria in the admissions' process? How have the admission policies and characteristics of incoming freshmen evolved during the past five years? What can we expect in the near future?

NASULGC and UCLA-ACE Surveys

The Office of Public Affairs of NASULGC surveyed member institutions in June, 1996 to collect data on admissions policies which were in place in fall 1995 for incoming first-year students at public universities. Information was received from 104 institutions producing a response rate of 65 percent.

In addition, information is available from a national survey of first-time, full-time freshmen who enrolled in the fall of 1995. This annual survey effort, conducted by the University of California at Los Angeles and the American Council on Education, collected data from approximately 240,000 students which was then weighted to reflect the 1.5 million full-time freshmen enrolled at colleges and universities across the country.

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[1]National Center for Education Statistics, *Projections of Education Statistics to 2005.* Washington: GPO, 1995, p. 52.

Admissions Policies and Recruitment Strategies

In the 1996 survey of NASULGC members, admission officers were asked to define the geographic range used for recruiting (see Figure 1). "International" was the most common response both to describe the current situation (39 percent) and the range five years ago (35 percent). There was evidence that some institutions expanded their target areas as more institutions moved from smaller to larger categories. For example, the proportion of institutions describing their range as "local or statewide" fell from 30 percent in 1990 to 21 percent by 1995. Likewise, a larger share of institutions were attracting students from the "region or nation" in 1995 (40 percent) compared to five years earlier (35 percent). These shifts could reflect both the institutions' efforts to recruit students who lived further away, and the students' tendency to apply to a wider range of institutions.

The five most important factors used in admissions' decisions by NASULGC institutions were high school grade point averages, admissions test scores, pattern of high school coursework, college-level coursework completed, and rank in class (see Figure 2). As criteria to be considered in the admissions process, the need for financial assistance and disability status were the least important.

Application Process

Many different types of two- and four-year institutions have reported in recent years that the number of applications from first-year students has risen. Among public universities, the situation has been mixed. About half of the NASULGC members surveyed in the summer of 1996 (48 percent) reported that they received more applications per accepted student in 1995 than they had in 1990. Another 40 percent said the number had remained the same, and only 12 percent had seen a drop during that time.

Administrators have found that high school students with strong academic credentials have been encouraged by their high school counselors to apply to a broad group of colleges and universities. These seniors often apply to a variety of schools and then wait to see not only which ones accept them but also the financial aid package offered. A combination of need-based financial assistance coupled with institutionally-based merit awards can vary substantially across different types of institutions and can affect enrollment decisions.

Even though the number of applications per enrolled student appears to have risen at many public universities, the yield rates (the proportion of accepted students who enroll) have fluctuated.

The NASULGC respondents reported that although 36 percent did enjoy higher yield rates in 1995 compared to their 1990 average, a larger proportion remained the same (40 percent), and 24 percent decreased. Generally, the yield rates at all public four-year institutions fell during the period 1982-92 from 58 percent to 44 percent, according to a study released in 1995 by AACRAO, ACT, CEEB, ETS, and NACAC[2]. During this same time, the number of applications per enrolled freshman at public four-year institutions increased from 2.4 to 3.4. There appears to be an inverse relationship between application rates and yield rates.

Enrollment Caps and Out-of-State Students

The majority of NASULGC members (70 percent) reported that their institutions did not have an enrollment cap in 1995. However, 30 percent did have a cap and about half of this group had had the cap in place for the past five years. The purpose of enrollment caps is to divert enrollment within a state from certain public institutions which may be overcrowded to other campuses within the four-year system. The presence of enrollment caps certainly could have affected the number of applications received by specific institutions within the past few years.

Most of the NASULGC respondents (80 percent) did not report that there was a limit on the percentage of first-year students who could originate from out-of-state. Among the 20 percent that did have such a limit, the average was 22 percent, with a range of 5-40 percent reported. For most institutions with a limit, the average had not changed substantially in the last five years.

Characteristics of 1995 Freshmen

Results from the NASULGC survey indicate that the first-year class that entered in 1995 was more diverse and had better scholastic credentials compared to the 1990 entering class. The large majority of respondents (68 percent) reported that the 1995 freshmen were better prepared academically, and about three in five (58 percent) said that there were higher proportions of students of color. About half of the NASULGC institutions (52 percent) reported that the size of their freshmen class had increased. The share of students on financial aid was either about the same (49 percent) or greater (49 percent) than five years ago.

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[2]Hunter M. Breland, James Maxey, Gail T. McLure, Michael J. Valiga, Michael A. Boatwright, Veronica L. Ganley and Laura M. Jenkins, *Challenges in College Admissions: A Report of a Survey of Undergraduate Admissions Policies, Practices, and Procedures.* Washington: American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers, American College Testing, The College Board, Educational Testing Service, and National Association of College Admission Counselors, 1995, p. 90.

Additional information about first-year students is provided by the UCLA-ACE annual survey. Selected characteristics of the 1995 freshmen who were enrolled full-time at public universities is summarized below[3]:

* Their average high school grade was B+.
* Students traveled an average of 100 miles to enroll at the university.
* The estimated parental family income was $49,736.
* Some freshmen believed that they would need remedial courses in certain subjects, including:

math	9 percent
foreign language	4 percent
science	4 percent
English	4 percent
reading	3 percent
social studies	3 percent

* Three in four freshmen reported that they had performed volunteer work during their senior year in high school.
* Slightly more than half (56 percent) had used a personal computer during the previous twelve months.
* About three in four (76 percent) anticipated that they would earn a postbaccalaureate degree.
* About half of the freshmen had parents who were college graduates.
* Three in four freshmen said that this college was their first choice.
* The top two reasons why these freshmen had selected this particular university were: (1) the good academic reputation (58 percent), and (2) the fact that graduates found good jobs (48 percent).

Competition for Freshmen

As the number of recent high school graduates began to decrease in the 1980s and the tuition and fee rates began to climb substantially, competition among higher education institutions increased. Marketing strategies now incorporate sophisticated technology in identifying and recruiting students. Potential applicants can not only gather information through the internet about different types of programs offered, but many high school seniors apply to institutions electronically.

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[3]Linda J. Sax, Alexander W. Astin, William S. Korn and Kathryn M. Mahoney, *The American Freshman: National Norms for Fall 1995.* Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute, UCLA, pp. 13-29.

The respondents to the 1996 NASULGC survey reported that their sense of the current competition among institutions varied by sector (see Figure 3 and the Appendix):

* The majority reported increased competition between their institution and out-of-state public four-year institutions (66 percent), as well as neighboring four-year public institutions within the state (55 percent), compared to 1990.

* Competition from community colleges and independent four-year institutions was more mixed, with similar proportions responding that the level was about the same (47-48 percent), or that it was now greater (46-48 percent).

Looking to the Future

The number of recent high school graduates will climb again for the next 10 years, and is expected to reach the 1980 level of 3.0 million by 2005. Not only will there be changes in the number of graduates, but their characteristics will continue to evolve. Women are already the majority of undergraduate students and this trend is likely to continue. Also, it is expected that the proportion of students of color who are finishing high school will continue to increase.

A 1995 study by the American Council on Education found that 58 percent of campus administrators at public universities believed that their institutions were doing an "excellent or very good job" attracting well-qualified students[4]. Expanding diversity on campus is more of a challenge. Only 34 percent of these administrators rated the institution as highly in the ability to attract African-American students, and, with regards to Hispanic students, the proportion was only 21 percent.

As administrators strive to increase diversity on campus, it is likely that their geographic area will expand as they recruit students who are both academically prepared to benefit from an undergraduate program but who also offer racial/ethnic, economic, artistic, athletic, and/or geographic diversity. The proportion of undergraduates who have demonstrated financial need is currently about one in two students. Although the rate of increase in tuition and fee rates at public universities has slowed down in recent years, it is expected that the rate will outpace annual inflation rates and thus drive up the cost of sending children to college.

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[4]Elaine El-Khawas, *Campus Trends: 1995.* Washington: American Council on Education, 1995, p. 32.

University admission counselors will continue to face the challenge of finding resources to provide the student services needed by students who require special services because of a disability as well as students who require remedial courses. It will be a challenge to make sure that equity issues are not overlooked as the pool of students who have traditionally composed the majority of incoming first-year students expands.

Attention will continue to focus on improving retention rates among undergraduates. In a recent study of persistence rates, slightly more than half (55 percent) of the freshmen who had entered 112 NASULGC institutions in the fall of 1989 had graduated six years later in the summer of 1995.[5] There was a significantly large range of graduation rates in this report, even among NASULGC institutions (23 percent - 93 percent).

Public universities need to continue to work with high school guidance counselors to make sure that students who demonstrate the potential for postsecondary education are encouraged to take the most rigorous courses available to prepare themselves for the level of work they will face in college. Admissions counselors still value not only the grades applicants have accumulated and the scores earned on standardized admission tests, but also the pattern of courses taken and success with college-level classes offered. There are many reasons why undergraduates drop out of college. Financial aid has allowed many lower and middle-income students to enter public universities; but these same students need to take the appropriate courses while in high school to adequately prepare them to succeed in college. The availability of financial aid accomplishes little if students are underprepared for college work.

A 1996 study by The College Board documented the benefit that rigorous college prep classes had for low-income students' aspirations to attend four-year colleges and universities. Compared to all students who had taken the SAT test in 1995, low-income students relied more heavily on advice from school counselors (58 percent vs. 51 percent) and their teachers (52 percent vs. 42 percent), rather than parents (70 percent vs. 82 percent) for advice on postsecondary educational plans.[6] (A more comprehensive report entitled *Improving the Odds: Factors that Increase the Likelihood of Four-Year College Attendance Among High School Seniors* is scheduled to be released from The College Board this fall.)

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[5]*The Chronicle of Higher Education,* July 5, 1996, pp. A41-A42.

[6]Jacqueline E. King, *The Decision to Go to College.* Washington: The College Board, 1996, p. 8.

In addition to providing remedial courses for students who require them, many public universities also have initiated or expanded honors programs for their brightest undergraduates. *Ivy League Programs at State School Prices* [7] is an excellent summary of 155 honors programs at public four-year universities. Honors programs are designed to attract academically talented students from families with moderate incomes. To qualify for consideration in most programs in recent years, these students have scored at least 1100 on SAT or 26 on ACT tests, and have earned at least a B average in high school. Most honors programs are structured to provide several smaller classes with more select students every semester during the freshmen and sophomore years. These classes are often taught by teams of full professors and many offer interdisciplinary themes. A few public universities offer honors colleges which are set up to allow students to take classes which are smaller and separate from those of other undergraduates but offer more opportunity for discussion and independent projects. Interest in honors colleges is expanding. By 1995, 537 colleges and universities were members of the National Collegiate Honors Council, including 108 NASULGC members[8].

Conclusion

Indications are strong that public universities are continuing to attract qualified first-year students. Results from the 1996 NASULGC survey indicate that almost two-thirds of the respondents (66 percent) believed that the overall level of selectivity of incoming freshmen was higher in 1995 than it had been in 1990. At least half also reported that the 1995 freshmen had completed more rigorous high school courses (60 percent), had scored higher on standardized admissions tests (55 percent), and had earned higher high school grades (52 percent).

Yet, due to fiscal restraints, it is not anticipated that public universities will substantially increase their undergraduate enrollment to accommodate the larger number of recent high school graduates during the next ten years who may wish to attend their institutions. Rather, selectivity at public research and doctoral universities is likely to increase.

It has become more difficult for admissions officers to predict what proportion of their accepted students will actually enroll on campus. This process of determining yield rates is likely

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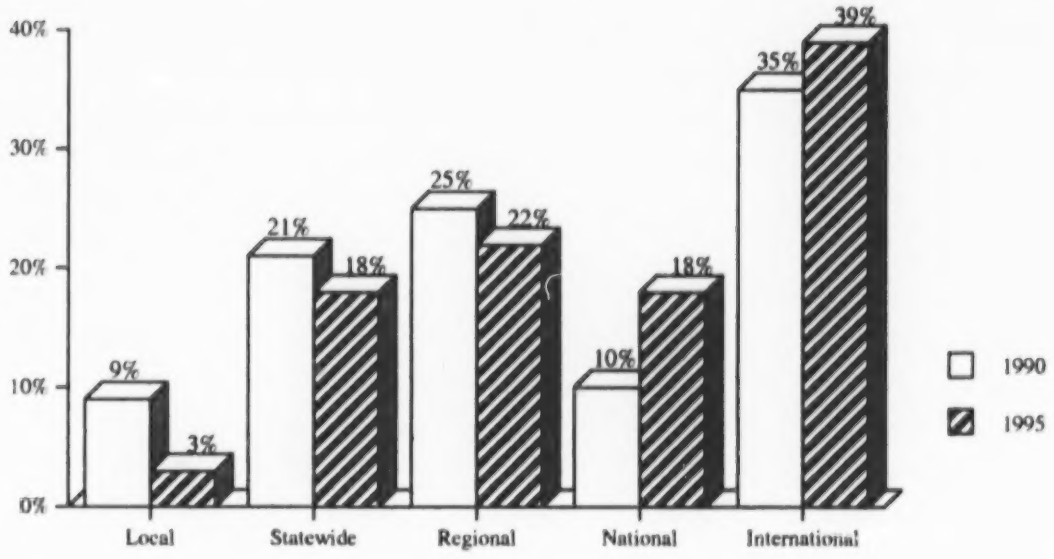
[7]Robert R. Sullivan and Karin R. Randolph, *Ivy League Programs at State School Prices.* New York: Prentice Hall, 1994.

[8]National Collegiate Honors Council, *Handbook.* Boise: Boise State University, 1996.

to continue to challenge campus officials as the number of applications per accepted student continues to increase.

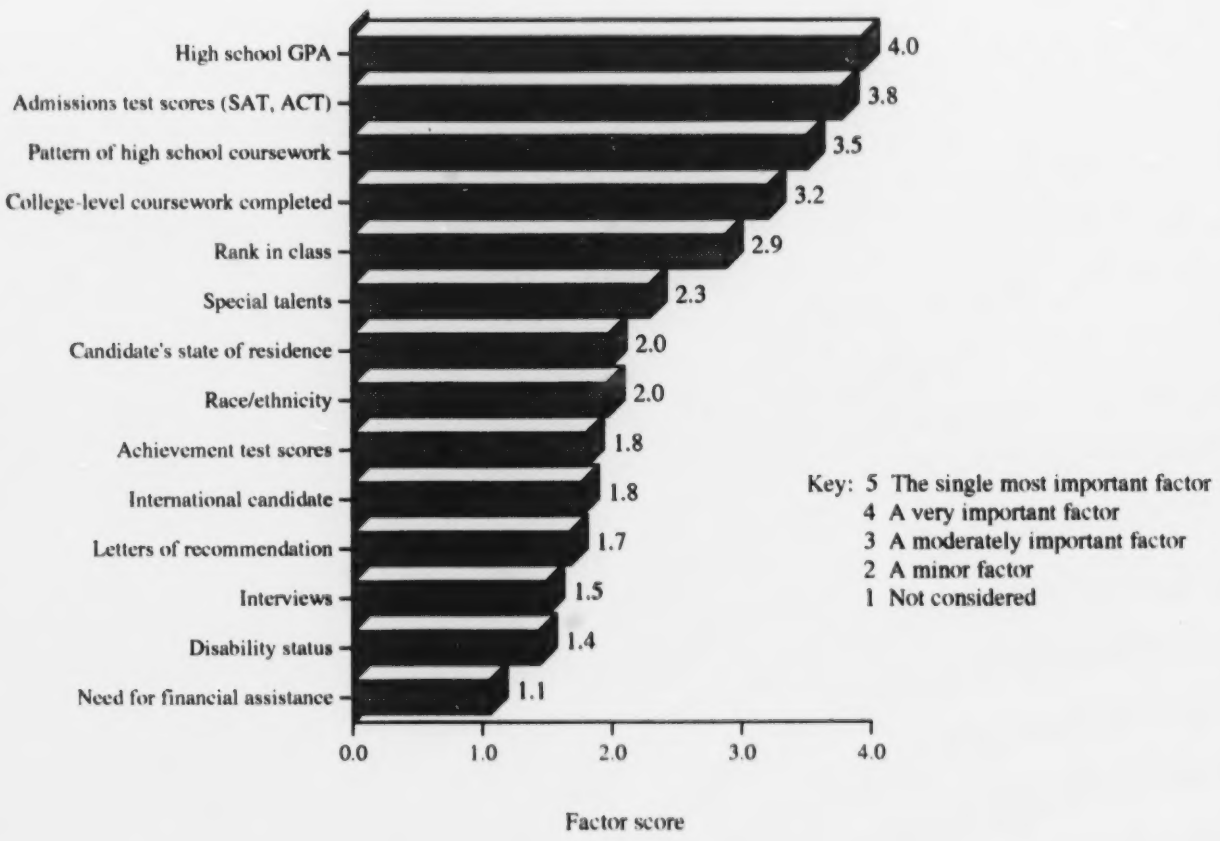
Competition among public universities is likely to intensify across state boundaries as institutions expand their geographic range in their efforts to attract well-qualified applicants and to increase diversity among undergraduates. Admissions officers need to continue to work with secondary guidance personnel to ensure that high school students who demonstrate the potential for postsecondary education receive the best academic preparation so that they may succeed after they are admitted.

Figure 1
Geographic Range of NASULGC Institutions for the
Recruitment of First-Year Students: 1990 and 1995



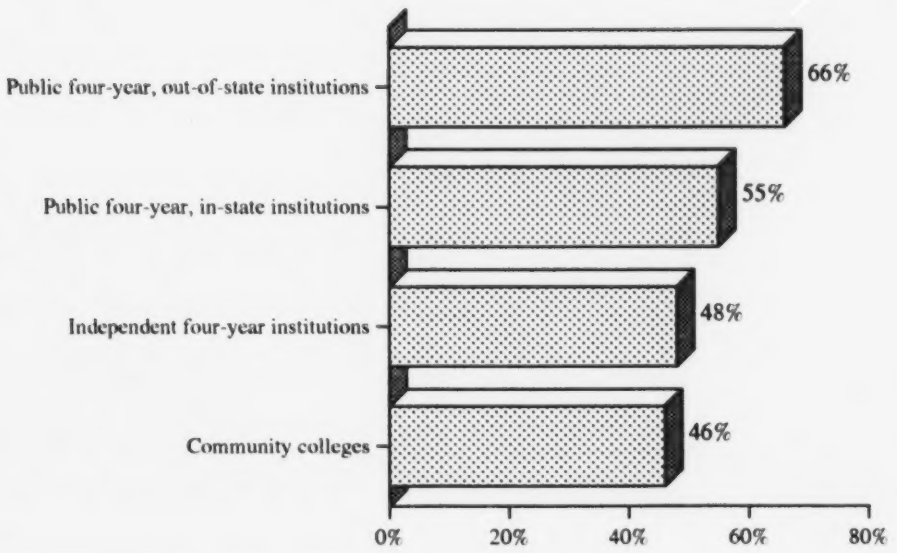
Source: National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges (NASULGC) survey of member institutions, 1996.

Figure 2
Importance of Factors in Admissions Process for
First-Year Students in 1995



Source: National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges (NASULGC) survey of member institutions, 1996.

Figure 3
Percentage of NASULGC Institutions That Reported Increased Competition With Different Types of Institutions During 1990-1995



Source: National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges (NASULGC) survey of member institutions, 1996.

Appendix
Supplemental Data from NASULGC Undergraduate Admissions Policy Survey: June 1996

How do admissions standards for freshmen at your institution compare with those five years ago?

	Standards today are:		
	Lower than five years ago	About the same	Higher than five years ago
A. The general level of selectivity	4%	30%	66%
B. The level and years of high school coursework	0%	40%	60%
C. High school GPA	3%	45%	52%
D. Performance on standardized admissions tests	5%	40%	55%

Have the number of applications per accepted student and yield rates changed over the past five years?

	Decreased	Stayed same	Increased
A. Number of applications per accepted student	12%	40%	48%
B. Yield rates	24%	40%	55%

How does the first-year class of 1995 compare with the class that entered five years ago?

	Compared with five years ago, the freshman class of 1995 was:		
	Smaller	About the same	Larger
A. Size	21%	27%	52%
	Lower	About the same	Higher
B. Academic qualifications	3%	29%	68%
	Narrower	About the same	Broader
C. Geographic origin	3%	59%	38%
	Less	About the same	Greater
D. Racial/ethnic diversity	1%	41%	58%
	Fewer	About the same	Greater
E. Proportion of students on financial aid	2%	49%	49%

How has your competition for entering first-year students changed during the past five years?

Compared to 5 years ago:	Less	About the same	Greater
A. Competition from in-state public four-year sector is:	2%	43%	55%
B. Competition from out-of-state public four-year sector is:	1%	33%	66%
C. Competition from community colleges is:	7%	47%	46%
D. Competition from independent four-year sector is:	4%	48%	48%